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Report to Congressional Requesters

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HOMELESSNESS

Changes in the Interagency Council on the Homeless Make It More Effective

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Resources, Community, and
Economic Development Division

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July 11, 1990

The Honorable Cardiss Collins
Chairwoman, Government Activities
and Transportation Subcommittee
Committee on Government Operations
House of Representatives

The Honorable Tom Lantos
Chairman, Employment and Housing Subcommittee
Committee on Government Operations
House of Representatives

This report responds to your April 12, 1989, request that we determine what steps the Interagency Council on the Homeless has taken to improve its implementation of the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act.

In March 1989, we testified before you that the Council had been slow to react to what the Congress said was an immediate and unprecedented homelessness crisis. We noted that the Council's attempts to meet the requirements of the act had been largely inadequate and ineffective.[1] This report discusses (1) the actions the Council has taken since our testimony to meet its McKinney Act responsibilities and (2) opinions of the Council's actions expressed by state officials and local assistance providers.

Results in Brief

The current Council has made significant and much needed changes in response to the March 1989 hearings. The leadership of the Council under its current Chairman, the Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), has improved substantially. For example, the Chairman's loan of 10 HUD employees to serve as the Council's full-time regional coordinators on a nonreimbursable basis has strengthened the Council's field coordination efforts and has improved services to the homeless by providing more technical assistance to state and local assistance providers.

Approximately two-thirds of the state officials and local assistance providers we surveyed said that the current Council's activities to

[1] Status of the Activities of the Interagency Council on the Homeless (GAO/T-RCED-89-16, Mar. 15, 1989).

improve and coordinate federal efforts to assist the homeless were somewhat to very effective. In addition, according to these officials and providers, the Council should be reauthorized to continue coordinating these efforts.

Finally, in our March 1989 testimony we criticized the Council's 1988 annual report because it contained only general policy recommendations and did not discuss or recommend the level of federal assistance necessary to alleviate homelessness. In contrast, the Council's 1989 annual report will be useful to the Congress because it focuses primarily on the federal response to homelessness—as required by the McKinney Act. The Council recommended full funding of the McKinney Act programs. It also recommended that the Congress reauthorize the McKinney Act programs through fiscal year 1991.

Background

The Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act (P.L. 100-77, July 1987) and its subsequent amendments (P.L. 100-628, Nov. 1988) represented the first efforts by the Congress to establish a comprehensive set of direct-assistance programs for homeless individuals. The act authorized 20 assistance programs for the homeless, although two of these programs were later removed from the McKinney Act's authorization and reauthorized under the Hunger Prevention Act of 1988. These programs, such as emergency assistance and transitional housing programs, help state and local assistance providers meet the urgent needs of the homeless. The McKinney Act programs are administered by several agencies, including HUD; the Departments of Health and Human Services (HHS), Labor, Education, and Veterans Affairs; the Federal Emergency Management Agency; and the General Services Administration.

Title II of the McKinney Act created the Interagency Council on the Homeless as an independent establishment within the executive branch. The McKinney Act charged the Council with reviewing all federal activities and programs to assist the homeless and with reducing duplication of effort among federal agencies. In doing so, the Council is further charged with monitoring, evaluating, and recommending improvements in programs and activities that assist the homeless; providing professional and technical assistance to public and private organizations serving the homeless; collecting and disseminating information; publishing a bimonthly bulletin summarizing available federal resources; and reporting annually to the President and the Congress on activities dealing with the homeless. The Council is scheduled to cease operations on October 1, 1990.

The Council is composed of the heads (or their representatives) of 15 federal agencies; headquarters staff in Washington, D.C.; 10 full-time regional coordinators provided by HUD; and part-time field coordinators provided by the other member agencies. (App. I provides information on the Council's budget data for fiscal years 1989 through 1991.) The activities necessary to carry out policies and priorities established by the Council are further developed by a policy group, assisted by Council staff. (App. II contains additional information on the organizational structure of the Council.)

Council Operations Improve

In March 1989, we testified that the Council's efforts to meet its statutory responsibilities under the McKinney Act were inadequate and ineffective. We identified several matters that hindered the Council's effectiveness, including inadequate policy guidance or direction from the Chairman and the uncertainty among working group members about the Council's role. Most importantly, we found that the Council did not provide critical information on McKinney Act programs to state agencies and local assistance providers, thus possibly precluding providers from receiving federal assistance. Since our March 1989 testimony, the Council has made significant changes to improve its implementation of the McKinney Act.

Council's Leadership Has Improved

In our March 1989 testimony, we testified that the former Council Chairman did not provide adequate policy guidance and management direction regarding federal assistance efforts for the homeless. According to the current Executive Director, the current Chairman provides regular policy guidance and management direction to the Council at the Council's quarterly meetings and through frequent meetings with his Council representative and the Executive Director. In addition, both the Chairman and Vice Chairman, the Secretary of HHS, frequently discuss policy and other matters between Council meetings with the Executive Director and other Council representatives.

In addition to chairing each Council meeting, the Chairman attends various Council functions, such as regional conferences, state contact meetings, and training workshops. Also, both the Chairman and Vice Chairman have visited shelters for the homeless. These visits resulted in a memorandum of understanding between HUD and HHS pledging that both Departments would develop and implement joint initiatives for assisting homeless families with children, welfare families in public or assisted housing, and homeless individuals with serious mental illnesses.

The Council Is Taking an Active Role in Fulfilling Its McKinney Act Responsibilities

In our March 1989 testimony, we concluded that more than a year and a half after the passage of the McKinney Act the previous Council had not developed detailed policies and guidance to direct its activities. In April 1989, the new Council staff developed a paper that explains the role of the Council, provides policy direction, and discusses some of its activities. The Council staff also developed a fact sheet on the Council in December 1989. The fact sheet concludes that the current Council is taking an active role in meeting its congressional mandate by (1) monitoring and evaluating activities to assist the homeless and recommending improvements, (2) providing technical assistance to state and local groups, and (3) collecting and disseminating information on programs assisting the homeless.

Council Assesses Programs and Activities Through Site Visits to State and Local Programs

To effectively fulfill its monitoring and evaluation mandate, the Council determined that its staff should conduct an overall assessment of how well the McKinney Act programs were working, supplementing the program-specific assessments conducted by member agencies. To avoid duplicating fieldwork already completed by others, the Council staff met with all the Council's member agencies and major advocacy organizations for assistance in identifying potential sites for Council staff to visit. Information from this meeting resulted in the staff's focusing the site visits on how public and private agencies address the issue of homelessness and on how well the McKinney Act programs work for state and local assistance providers.

During the summer of 1989, Council staff visited programs in Alabama, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, Oklahoma, Utah, and Washington. The Council provided a summary of the information obtained during these visits to members of its policy group on October 2, 1989.

Policy group members were requested to assess the problems identified during the visits to the McKinney Act programs, state their position on each issue, and identify any appropriate agency action(s). Council agencies either have made or are considering making administrative changes and/or legislative recommendations, such as revising the application process for the Supportive Housing Demonstration Program and using Emergency Shelter Grant Program funds to build new facilities, that are responsive to the problems identified. A final report on the site visits, which included agency responses, was distributed to the policy group on March 6, 1990.

Technical Assistance Is Provided in a Variety of Ways

Council member agencies provide technical assistance in a variety of ways. For instance, HUD conducted briefing sessions on its McKinney Act programs at each of its regional offices for interested assistance providers. Member agencies have also designated program staff in headquarters who are available to assist these groups. These individual agency efforts are supplemented through the activities of the Council's full-time regional coordinators and part-time field coordinators.

The McKinney Act amendments require that the Council establish a schedule for biennial regional workshops to be held in each of the 10 federal regions to help organizations serving the homeless. As of May 31, 1990, the current Council had held four conferences, each averaging about 490 participants, in Atlanta, Georgia; Hartford, Connecticut; Fort Worth, Texas; and Chicago, Illinois. Conference participants consisted of assistance providers, representatives from the Council and other federal agencies, elected and appointed state and local officials, and homeless people.

We attended the Atlanta, Hartford, and Fort Worth conferences. Information disseminated at the conferences included Council publications, such as the Program Alert and the Council Communique, and participants' material, including information on shelters and state and local programs. The conferences also included breakout sessions on such topics as how to obtain federal funds and/or properties for shelters, as well as sessions giving information on programs not under the McKinney Act that assist the homeless.

Making the Regional Coordinators Full-Time Has Increased Their Effectiveness

The McKinney Act requires the Council to provide professional and technical assistance on programs for the homeless to states, localities, and other public and private nonprofit agencies. In our March 1989 testimony, we stated that although the Council's then part-time regional coordinators were important connectors linking the Council with the states, only half of the coordinators were active in their outreach effort. We also concluded that the regional coordinators had problems obtaining information from the Council. During this review, we found that the current Council has addressed these problems.

In May 1989, the Chairman of the Council provided 10 HUD employees to work full-time as the Council's regional coordinators in each of HUD's 10 federal regions. In addition, member agencies designated representatives from their respective agencies to serve as part-time field coordinators. There are presently 124 field coordinators, who, having other regular agency responsibilities, assist the Council part-time.

The principal duties and responsibilities of the full-time regional coordinators are to provide technical assistance in the field, promote the use and implementation of the McKinney Act programs by the public and private sector, and provide direction to the part-time field coordinators. The Council sponsored a two-day orientation session for the full-time regional coordinators in May 1989 and held a training workshop in January 1990 to discuss their overall mission and review specific duties and responsibilities. These training sessions are supplemented by weekly activities: teleconference calls, regional activity reports to the Council, and Council staff mailings of information on homelessness issues and programs.

The part-time field coordinators' primary Council responsibility is to provide technical assistance to individuals and organizations seeking general or specific information about programs and activities for the homeless. In addition, the part-time field coordinators are supposed to attend monthly Council meetings with their full-time regional coordinator, assist in planning and conducting Council workshops, and provide the full-time regional coordinators with information for the weekly report to the Council.

The Council Provides Information to Over 25,000 Individuals and Groups

Council member agencies and staff collect information on federal, state, and local programs and activities. This information is shared with the regional coordinators, state contacts, assistance providers, and others interested in serving the homeless. Council documents used to disseminate information on homelessness include the Program Alert, the Flash Alert, the Council Communique, the McKinney Act program guide, the Council's resource list, and a list of federal programs not under the McKinney Act that help the homeless. Many of these documents are issued to over 25,000 individuals and groups, including federal, state, and local officials; public and private nonprofit organizations; advocacy and interest groups; assistance providers; and concerned citizens. (See app. III for additional information on selected Council publications.)

In July 1989, the Council issued the McKinney Act program guide. The guide provides summaries of McKinney Act programs—their purposes, eligible applicants, and program contacts. The Council's resource list provides an updated list of contact people for homelessness issues at both the federal and state levels. Finally, the Council prepared and issued a booklet describing over 60 federal programs not under the McKinney Act that are available to help the homeless.

The Council also has a data base that provides funding information on the various McKinney Act programs. The data base currently contains information on "first recipients" of McKinney Act funding by program, by state, and by region. Funding information is currently available for 1987 through 1989. The system is capable of ranking states by total funding for a single year or for the entire period the programs were funded. This information is routinely disseminated to the full-time regional coordinators and to state contacts and is also available upon request.

Officials and Assistance Providers Basically Satisfied With Council Services

For our March 1989 testimony, we conducted a telephone survey of 18 state officials and 11 local assistance providers to obtain their views of the Council's effectiveness. Almost half of the state officials we talked to had not been contacted by the Council's then part-time regional coordinators. In other instances, the Council had not provided the information needed to effectively implement and coordinate McKinney Act programs at the state level. During this review, we again surveyed 24 of the 29 organizations (16 state officials and 8 local assistance providers) to determine whether their perception of the new Council's activities differed from the services provided by the previous Council.

We asked the officials and assistance providers to rate the services provided by the Council using a scale ranging from very effective to very ineffective. Over two-thirds of the respondents who rated the Council—headquarters and regional—said the Council was somewhat to very effective in monitoring, evaluating, and recommending improvements in programs; providing professional and technical assistance; and collecting and disseminating information. In addition, approximately two-thirds of the respondents said that the Council should be reauthorized because it is doing a good job coordinating federal assistance programs for the homeless.

Four of the 24 state officials and local assistance providers we contacted suggested that the Council could more effectively fulfill its responsibilities by visiting more state and local programs. In this way, the Council could better understand the actual problems in these programs and possible solutions. In addition, a few of the respondents said that more specific information on innovative and model programs and on how to apply for McKinney Act program funds would be helpful.

1989 Annual Report Focused on Federal Assistance and Made Recommendations

In our March 1989 testimony, we noted that the Council's 1988 annual report contained only general policy recommendations and did not specify the level of federal assistance necessary to resolve the problem of homelessness. In contrast, the Council's 1989 annual report presents data on the federal response to homelessness, the nature of homelessness, specific accomplishments and activities of the Council, and the Administration's policies and strategies to address homelessness. It also recommended that the Congress

- fully fund the McKinney Act programs as expeditiously as possible and
- reauthorize the McKinney Act programs through fiscal year 1991.

In addition, the annual report recommended that

- federal and other assistance should support, and actively encourage, comprehensive approaches to help homeless individuals and families and promote self-reliance;
- public and private assistance for homeless individuals and families be redirected from emergency services and shelter to longer-term housing and continuing support services; and
- the federal government actively research, experiment with, and evaluate innovative ways to assist homeless people.

Conclusions

The Council has made substantial improvements to correct past problems under the leadership of its current Chairman. The creation of the 10 full-time regional coordinators has strengthened the Council's field coordination efforts. In addition, state officials and local assistance providers contacted during our telephone survey said that the Council's activities and operations were somewhat to very effective. Furthermore, the Council's 1989 annual report focused on federal assistance efforts for the homeless and made recommendations that we believe will be useful to the Congress in its policy deliberations.

Recommendation to the Congress

The Council is only authorized through fiscal year 1990. Because the 18 McKinney Act programs are administered by 7 federal agencies, a mechanism is needed to coordinate, monitor, evaluate, and recommend improvements in these programs and assist in their implementation. Therefore, we recommend that the Congress reauthorize the Interagency Council on the Homeless. This reauthorization would allow the Council to coordinate the McKinney Act programs and help ensure that the

urgently needed assistance provided by the Congress through the McKinney Act is provided to the homeless.

To obtain information for this report we examined documents relevant to the Council's role, including minutes of the full Council meetings, Council publications, weekly status reports of the full-time regional coordinators, and the Council's 1989 annual report. We interviewed HUD's Assistant Secretary for Community Planning and Development, as well as the Council's Executive Director and other staff. We also interviewed all 10 of the Council's full-time regional coordinators and 24 of the 29 state officials and local assistance providers we had contacted for our March 1989 testimony. We discussed the information presented in this report with the responsible agency officials and incorporated their comments and suggestions where appropriate. As agreed, we did not obtain written comments. We performed our review in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards from July 1989 to April 1990.

This work was done under the direction of John M. Ols, Jr., Director, Housing and Community Development Issues. If you have any questions concerning this report, please contact Mr. Ols on (202) 275-5525. Major contributors to this report are listed in appendix IV.

J. Dexter Peach
Assistant Comptroller General

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Abbreviations

GAO	U.S. General Accounting Office
HHS	Department of Health and Human Services
HUD	Department of Housing and Urban Development

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Budget Data for the Interagency Council on the Homeless, Fiscal Years 1989-91

Dollars in Thousands

Category	Actual 1989	Budget estimate 1990	Current estimate 1990	Estimate 1991	Change 1990 to 1991
			Funding		
Budget authority	1,100	1,200	1,083	1,214	+131
Obligations	686	1,346	1,900	1,214	−686
Outlays	718	1,300	1,900	1,376	−524
			Breakdown of obligations		
Personal services	468	481	640	663	−23
Travel (persons)	68	200	200	200	0
Travel (things)	0	3	3	3	0
Rent, communications, utilities	30	10	60	60	0
Printing, reproductions	23	40	330	93	−237
Other services	91	567	622	150	−472
Supplies, materials	4	15	15	15	0
Furniture, equipment	2	30	30	30	0
Total	**686**	**1,346**	**1,900**	**1,214**	**−686**
			Staffing		
Number of full-time personnel	10	10	12	12	0
Number of appointments at end of year	10	10	12	12	0
Total staff-years	**9.1**	**10**	**12**	**12**	**0**

Source: Interagency Council on the Homeless

The Organizational Structure of the Interagency Council on the Homeless

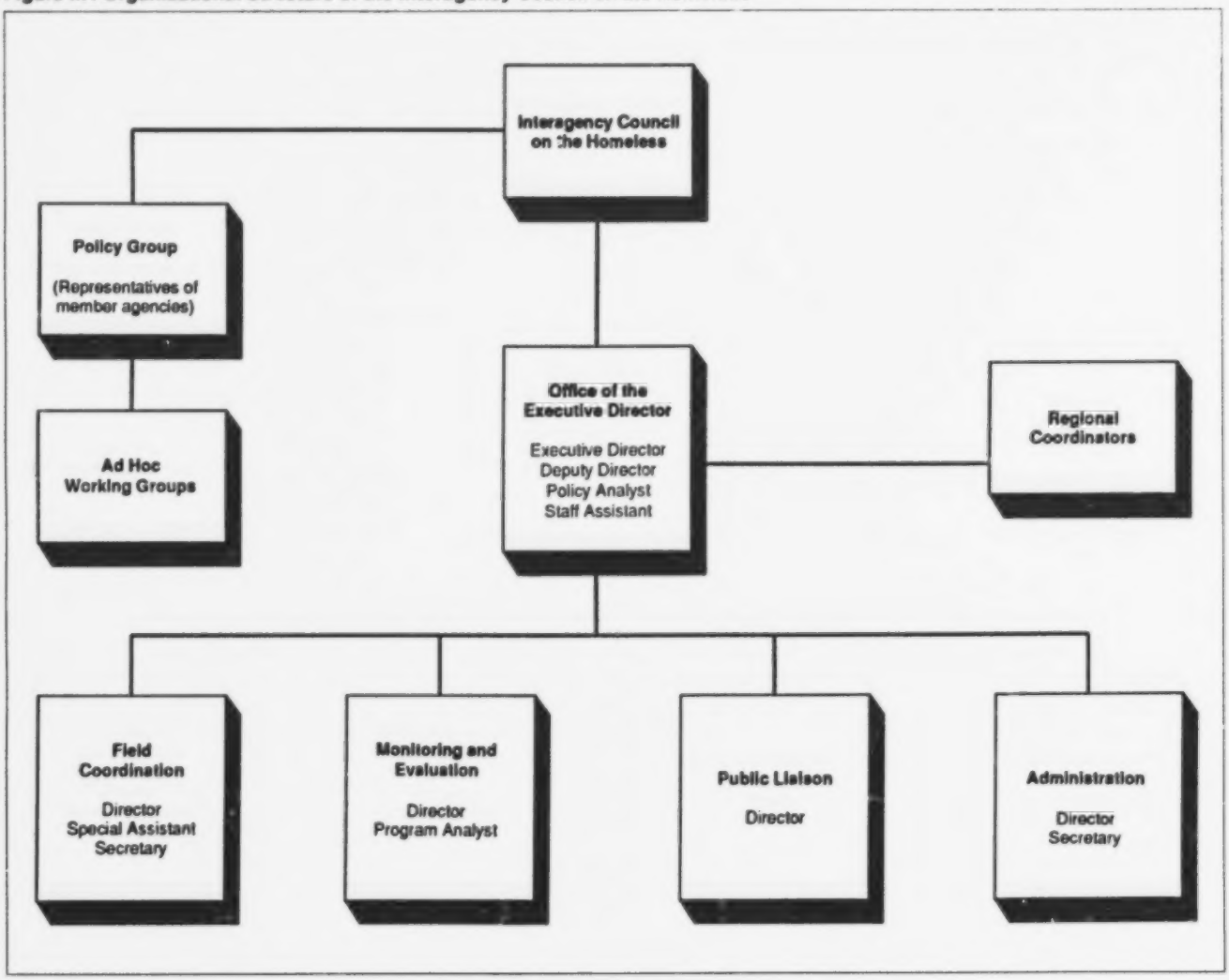
On March 3, 1989 the former Executive Director of the Interagency Council on the Homeless resigned, and the remaining staff were subsequently replaced. The former Chairman and the remaining Council members were also replaced because of the change in Administrations. At their first full Council meeting in April 1989, the current Council members elected the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) as the Chairman and the Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) as the Vice Chairman. The Executive Director was also approved at this meeting. The current Council was fully staffed by late May 1989. As specified in the McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, the Council is scheduled to cease operations on October 1, 1990.

The current Council is composed of the heads (or their representatives) of federal departments and agencies concerned with homelessness. The Council members are the Secretaries of Agriculture, Commerce, Defense, Education, Energy, HHS, HUD, Interior, Labor, Transportation, and Veterans Affairs, and the heads of four independent agencies: ACTION, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the General Services Administration, and the U.S. Postal Service. In 1989, the Council added representatives from the Executive Office of the President's Low Income Opportunity Board and the Office of Management and Budget. The Council also consists of 12 full-time staff members in Washington, D.C., as well as 10 full-time regional coordinators provided by HUD. The other member agencies provide part-time field coordinators.

The activities necessary to carry out policies and priorities established by the Council are further developed by a policy group, assisted by Council staff. The policy group, composed of subcabinet-level representatives from each member agency, meets monthly to discuss policy issues that affect program areas, to determine appropriate actions, to direct implementation of specific assignments at their agencies, and to provide the full Council with policy options and recommendations. The Executive Director chairs these monthly meetings.

When a specific issue requires examination for a considerable amount of time, the policy group creates an ad hoc working group. A working group consists of agency representatives, including technical staff. Once the working group has concluded its objective, it reports its findings to the policy group.

Figure II.1 Organizational Structure of the Interagency Council on the Homeless



Source: Interagency Council on the Homeless

Selected Council Publications

Program and Flash Alerts

These publications contain information regarding McKinney Act and non-McKinney Act programs available to help the homeless, including funding levels, regulatory actions, application deadlines, eligible applicants, and the appropriate federal contact. The Program Alert is distributed on an as-needed basis to over 25,000 individuals and groups. Thirteen issues were published between April 1989 and April 1990. The Flash Alert is issued to the full-time regional coordinators and state contacts. It is distributed on an as-needed basis. Twenty-one issues were published between April 1989 and April 1990.

Fact Sheets

These publications contain pertinent information relevant to homelessness. They are disseminated either as inserts in the Program Alert or the Council Communique or are submitted for distribution at regional workshops or other meetings on request.

Council Communique

This publication covers general items of interest to those involved with homeless issues and highlights exemplary federal, state, and local programs. It is issued bimonthly and distributed to over 25,000 individuals and groups. Six issues were published between April 1989 and April 1990.

Appendix IV

Major Contributors to This Report

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